{See Note at end.}

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GOD IS LIGHT.

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"And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."—1 JOHN 1 : 5.

This messenger has a message. He is not one who has run before he was sent; the tidings that he brings are matters of which he has immediate and certain knowledge. It is not mere hearsay that he rehearses; what he tells he got at first hands. "That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld and our hands handled concerning the word of life . . . declare we unto you." It is good to hear one speak thus with the accent of conviction and certainty. I sat not long ago by the sick-bed of a child and the mother was questioning the physician. His replies were hesitating, dubious, evasive; and when he had gone the mother said to me: "I don't believe he knows what to say." That was a rash conclusion, no doubt: the physician's reticence might have been wise; none the less it was a source of great pain to the mother. One who could have spoken with clearness and assurance, even though his words had been no more encouraging, would have caused her less suffering. In all matters of great moment we like to hear positive testimony; the man who seems to know whereof he affirms, and to speak with the emphasis of clear knowledge, is the man to whom we are most ready to listen. So John speaks in this passage. It is not rumor that he is reciting, it is competent testimony. He multiplies words to show us the immediateness of his knowledge.

What he has to tell is something about God. There is no other subject of which men think, concerning which it is so important to have clear ideas. To every man who believes in God, God is the ultimate fact: and the whole universe, its laws, its tendencies, its relations, its results, are all conditioned by that fact. All our thoughts of life, of duty, of destiny, grow out of our ideas of God. Our characters are shaped by our doctrine of God. Our social and political life will constantly reflect our real belief concerning God. Even though these beliefs do not enter largely into our conversation, and may not be frequent subjects of speculation, yet they will surely tinge and flavor all our thought and action. A drop of aniline dye will color a large amount of

water; a grain of musk will spread its pervasive odor through a spacious room. Our thoughts of God, though they may not greatly occupy our active mental powers, are of such a nature that our whole lives must be affected by them.

When, therefore, one whom we believe to be a trustworthy teacher comes to us with positive statements concerning God, the wise will attend to what he says. And this teacher, to whose message we are now listening, is believed by most of us to be competent and trustworthy. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved. With him who came to manifest to men the very life of God, he maintained relations of especial intimacy; "the Life was manifested," he says, "and we have seen it;" all that a reverent discipleship, a docile temper, a sympathetic heart could learn about God from the Son of God, John has learned. "Yea," he declares, "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." And not only does he possess this knowledge of the divine character; he feels, as every man must feel who has really gained this knowledge, that he is commissioned by God to declare the truth that he has learned to his fellow men. Because there is no other truth so vital or so precious he must make it known. He is a messenger to whom good tidings have been delivered, and his heart burns within him to tell what he has heard. "And this", he cries, "is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." It is evident that this messenger thinks that this is news, and that it is good news. There is a thrill of hope and exultation in his voice as he delivers his message. "These things we write that our joy may be fulfilled." The joy of good news is the joy of telling it.

But what is the meaning of this message, "God is light"?

1. Light is the great revealer. "Whatever doth make manifest is light." It is not said here that God employs light as one of the agencies by which he discloses himself; it is said that God *is* light. If this means anything, it means that it is as much the nature of God to manifest himself as it is the nature of light to shine. Revelation is not therefore a process or an act determined on by God, after ages of self-concealment; he did not begin, four or five thousand years ago, to reveal himself; creation and revelation began together; as soon as there was an intelligence that could know God, God began to manifest himself to that intelligence. You do not think of a light as a force that sometimes acts with luminous effect and sometimes fails to act. If you had a lamp that served you fitfully; that withheld its rays at times, and at times imparted them, you would not call it a *light* when it was not shining. When the apostle says that God is light, he means that self-revelation is the essential nature of divinity. As one strong thinker says, "All that God is he imparts, he reveals. He is no more a distant being, that man cannot approach him; he is not an inaccessible being, that man cannot find him; he is not an unknown being, but what he is he has made known."

But though it is the nature of God to reveal himself, and though, through all the ages of the world, he has been manifesting himself to men, yet this revelation is rather mediate than immediate. We do not always see the light, but we always see by means of the light. But for the light we could not see; the fact that we can see is unanswerable proof that there is light. The light itself is revealed in the revelation to our vision of the objects that it makes visible.

No man hath seen God at any time. Neither with the physical nor with the mental eye do we directly behold him. Nevertheless the reason which perceives and understands the facts and laws and relations of things sees by means of the light of God's being—the light of truth proceeding from him that floods the universe. It is because God is in the world that we are able to understand the world. What is it in nature that we understand? We study her laws, her processes, her methods; we organize our sciences, we state our formularies, we mark and explain the operations of natural forces by our tables of tides and times, and weights and measures, and chemical equivalents,—but what is it that makes all these collections of knowledge orderly, these statements intelligible, these

formularies possible. Could our minds comprehend nature if there were no mind in nature? Is it not the workings of the infinite creative Mind that our minds follow in all our scientific studies, in all our adaptations of natural force? We can reason about nature; we can see reason in nature; there is reason in nature; the science which denies God exists only because there is a God, and makes no affirmation, states no natural law, that does not declare him. And when a scientist undertakes to deny and disprove God, he is like one who should say: I can see plainly all the objects round about me; here a wall and there a window and there a tree and there a man; and because I can see so distinctly I know that there is no such thing as light. The light of nature, by which the scientist sees, is nothing else but God immanent in nature, manifesting himself to men through the order and law which form the very substance of all our sciences.

2. The text includes other meanings less profound, but no less precious. When it is said that God is light, it is meant not only that it is his nature to manifest himself, and that it is the manifestation that he has made of himself by which we are guided in all our scientific studies, it is meant also that moral truth or truthfulness, veracity, is an attribute of his nature. Falsehood is often put for darkness in the Bible, and light for the truthfulness which is its opposite. To say that God is light is the same as to say that there is no deceit or guile in his nature; that he always deals openly and frankly and faithfully with all his children. To us this may not be any fresh revelation; the thought is trite when you put it in this abstract form; yet it seemed to this evangelist good news, and there have been times, no doubt, when the power to realize this statement would have lifted a great load from all our hearts. To be able to believe that God is true, that he never deceives his children, that his word can always be trusted, would sometimes bring great relief to troubled minds.

3. Light is the symbol of purity, and the saying that God is light means also that God is pure.

The force of this declaration cannot be felt by us as it must have been by those to whom the apostle was writing; for although the Jews had received a revelation of God's purity, the religions of the nations round about them represented their gods as creatures of gross and carnal passions; the Phœnician and the Moabite divinities, the gods of the Greek mythology were beings who delighted in impurity, and their worship was often combined with drunken and riotous orgies. To those living in the midst of these corrupting influences, to which the Jews had often yielded, the clear announcement by this messenger of the absolute purity of God must have served as a tonic. It was not a new truth to them; but it was an impressive confirmation of what they had been taught already concerning the character of God.

4. Light is also the symbol of righteousness. The primary meaning of right is straight: a right line is a straight line; and the paths of the light are right lines. The statement that God is light implies, therefore, that he is not only truthful and pure, but that he is upright and just, that he does no wrong. And this must be interpreted to mean that righteousness in him is the same, in its essence, as righteousness in us—

> "That nothing can be good in him,
> That evil is in me."

In individual cases we may not be able to judge of his dealings; for we may not know all the facts. Some things that he does may seem unjust; but if we could comprehend all the circumstances, and all the consequences of his action, we should see that he had acted with perfect justice. And we know that the principles on which he acts are right principles—principles that *we* recognize as right. The fundamental laws of morality as we know them are the laws of his being. The Judge of all the earth will do right—and the right that he does will not confound our moral judgments, but will confirm them. He has not put into our minds intuitions of truth and justice that he himself habitually flouts in all his relations with us.

It is well for us to get fast hold of this truth, for in our days, as well as in the days of the apostle, it is often in effect

contradicted, even by those who try to teach us about God. That God is righteous, all men would assert; but there are many who go on to affirm that righteousness in him is something different from righteousness in us; that he often acts on principles that it would be wrong for us to follow. This text gives us the right to challenge every such statement. God is light. The ways of his administration, the methods of his justice are clear as the day. There is no blur or haze about his great designs. He is the sun of righteousness.

5. Light, in its beneficent ministries, is the symbol of goodness, and the declaration that God is light is only another way of saying that God is love.

This means that he is not malicious nor resentful, but gracious and kind. It means that he has no fierce passions that kindle and burn when his creatures provoke him; that his will is a loving will. We read in the Bible of the wrath of God, and doubtless the phrase is not without meaning. If God is a moral being, if he is capable of being pleased with goodness, then he must be capable of being displeased with iniquity. And doubtless a holy indignation is aroused within him at the sight of moral evil. But doubtless this feeling never overbears his fatherly love for men; in his wrath he always remembers mercy. There is nothing of spite or vengeance in his nature.

To say that God is love involves also the truth of his infinite benevolence. He is not malicious, and he is not selfish. Light that is not diffused, that does not shine, is a contradiction in terms. A light shut up within itself, that only now and then emitted its radiance,—you could not conceive of. It is the nature of God to manifest himself, as we have seen; and since his nature is love it is his nature to bless all his creatures. To impart unto them of the fullness of his grace is the very law of his being.

This truth is not yet by any means of universal acceptation. Those who believe that God is infinitely benevolent, that he finds his highest pleasure in ministering to his creatures, are yet but a small number even in the Christian church. The representations of God that have been most common are those that exhibit him as an absolute tyrant and dictator, as one who does everything for his own glory; who demands that everything shall be tributary to his honor and pleasure; who regards with jealousy the affection bestowed by his children upon one another; who claims everything for himself, and finds all his blessedness in exacting tribute of praise and obedience and service from all his creatures. I am sure that some of the theologies would justify us in describing God as the absolutely selfish being,—and that that which they set forth as his glorious sovereignty is only another name for perfect selfishness.

To any whose minds may have been infested by this dark notion, the apostle's message that God is light ought to bring a bright assurance. God is not the central Ego of the universe, delighting to impose his omnipotent will on the creatures of his power; he is not the eternal taskmaster, or the infinite tax-gatherer, drawing into his treasuries all the powers and possessions of his children; the forces of his being are not centripetal like gravitation on the earth, but radiant, like light in the heavens, they go forth from him continually, to cheer and bless all the creatures of his care. His glory, his blessedness, are found not in receiving but in giving. God is light.

In him is no darkness at all. This does not mean that there are no depths in him that our reason cannot sound,—that his being is transparent to our finite vision. The fact that there is no darkness in him is one reason why we cannot discern him perfectly. It is impossible for us to see when there is nothing but light. It is only by the aid of shadows that vision is possible to the bodily eye, or the finite mind. When we look the sun in the face we are blinded. Absolute being is beyond our comprehension. But when John says that there is no darkness at all in God he means that he is perfect in these moral qualities that we have been considering—that he is perfect truth and perfect purity and perfect righteousness and perfect love.

This, then, is the message which this disciple declares that he has received from God himself, and that he has been

commissioned to announce to us. Is it any wonder that it seemed to him good news, and that he felt that his joy would not be full until he had spread it all abroad? If he really believed all this,—if he meant by his saying all that we have found in it—(and I think if you will read this epistle through you will find that he did mean every word of it, and that I have not read into his message anything which was not in his thought)—then there was reason enough why he should exult in the privilege of conveying to his fellow men these wonderful tidings.

To you, my friends, I bring to-day this same message. It is just as true to-day as it was when it was first uttered—just as true, and just as precious, and far more credible. It is easier far for you and me to believe it than it was for those to whom John wrote. Eighteen centuries of the clear shining of this light from the face of Jesus Christ have filled the world with its brightness and its beauty; it shines from the pages of our jurisprudence, it lights up our social life with tender and gracious ministries, it pours its healing flood from schools and sanctuaries into the lives of men, it glows with heavenly radiance upon the altars of the home, it flings the halo of an immortal hope around the spectral marbles that stand above our dead. O beloved, is it hard for you to take this message to your hearts to-day? Can you not receive it, and rejoice in it, and walk in the light of it, henceforth?

If it is true, some things must follow whereunto we shall do well if we take heed.

If God is light, then they who stand always in his presence,—(and whither shall we flee from his presence?) are perfectly known to him. The light that reveals him searches us! There is not a secret of our lives he does not know. There is not a hidden chamber of sin into which his glance does not penetrate. "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

If God is light, then he is not honored by any want of candor in our study or any deceit or concealment in our teaching of the truth that concerns him. Those servants of his who are afraid that they shall know too much truth, who diligently shut their minds against the light that is blazing round about them, are very unprofitable servants.

Though God is light, yet it is true, sometimes, that the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. The rays of divine truth are sometimes refracted when they enter the denser medium of the human understanding. God has been seeking in all the ages to reveal himself to men; the Bible is the record of that revelation; but the human element that is mingled with it sometimes troubles us. There are dark things in the Bible, but these are products of the haze that overspreads all finite thought. If the pure and perfect ray of revelation is sometimes dimmed and sometimes bent as it enters the minds and is reflected in the words of gross and unspiritual men, let us not forget that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Finally, let us hold fast to this truth, even when clouds and darkness are round about him. In the darkest night, in the cloudiest day, you do not lose faith in the sun. You know that he is in his place in the heavens, steadfast and clear in his shining as ever; you know that the morning will see him mounting the sky again, that the clouds will disappear from before his face. O you whose faith in the sun fails not, why will you not believe in the sure and everlasting mercies of God! Upon some of you the night of a heavy and cheerless sorrow has closed in, and you walk darkly and will not be comforted. Remember and believe, I pray you, that he by whom all the issues of your lives are shaped is perfect righteousness and perfect love; that though the clouds may sometimes hide Him, God is light and in him is no darkness at all. Who is among you that walketh in darkness and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord and stay upon his God.

Our "Church-Door Pulpit" hints its purpose in its name. It aims to furnish fortnightly a transfigured tract,—transfigured by being paid for, and by representing not so much a given system of beliefs as the emphasis, in somewhat varying beliefs, on "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion;" this tract to be taken from the rack or table at the church-door to the home, there to serve its little mission by reading in the family, lending to a neighbor, mailing to a distant friend, etc. We hope the plan may be destined to wide adoption by Liberal churches as part of their regular church-work.

The word "UNITY" in the title bears to the Committee who arrange the series a wide meaning, pointing more to the substance, than to the forms, of religious thought and faith; and in inviting contributions they have sought, not only through the whole range, but in both directions beyond the range, of those who bear the "Unitarian" name,—though most of the writers must naturally be found within that name. "New Orthodoxy," "New Judaism," those who care for no name but "Religion," and the "Ethical Societies," will all be represented. The choice of subject is left to the writers; and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.* "One of your best—a life-helping sermon, or a thought-sermon reaching the life," was the invitation sent out.

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